

THE ENVIRONMENT

Concern about sharp decline of the stork

Allgemeine Zeitung
MAINZ

Poland is not the home from home it used to be from the vantage point of a stork's nest, but it still has by far the largest number of nesting stork pairs in Europe — nearly 34,000.

A stork's nest in Upper Silesia illustrates the point. It is soundly built and within easy distance of wetlands with an ample supply of frogs, mice and insects, the stork's staple diet.

But the nest is perched on an overhead cable pylon on the main railway line between Warsaw and Breslau, and over 200 trains a day thunder beneath the nest.

It may seem an odd place to build a nest, but it was obviously the best the pair could find. The Polish countryside is simply not what it was.

Yet the Federal Republic of Germany, with a mere 600 nesting pairs, must be even less inviting to storks in search of a home for the mating season.

Numbers have declined steeply in living memory — from 4,407 pairs in 1934 to just under 2,000 in 1965 and today's paltry 600.

The downturn shows no sign of



But how long before he falls?

(Photo: Archives)

stopping. Eighty-five per cent of West German storks have beat a retreat to the river marshland of Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein.

In Baden-Württemberg, as in neighbouring Alsace and Switzerland, storks would long have ceased to breed had not pairs been bred in captivity and released in the hope that they would return in the wild.

A wide range of reasons account for the decline in the stork population, but farmers are mainly to blame.

Drainage of wetland, ploughing of what used to be marshy meadows, factory farming in general and pesticides in particular have had a devastating effect.

So have the progressive destruction of established and variegated land use

patterns, ribbon development and fencing.

Says biologist Jochen Hölzinger of the German League for the Protection of Birds: "The collapse of the white stork population within a century is a mirror image of our environmental sins."

The league's Baden-Württemberg region has issued the most comprehensive survey of European stork populations yet published.

Country reports, but with information not available from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Rumania, Yugoslavia and Albania, show there to have been at least 51,355 nesting pairs in Europe before 1984.

The only population that can still be considered to be stable is Poland's 33,900 pairs, whereas the stork populations in Hungary and Czechoslovakia have declined markedly to about 5,000 and 1,670 pairs respectively over the past 25 years.

Greece too now boasts only about 1,500 pairs. The population has plummeted in Austria, especially in Burgenland, the region east of Vienna and along the Hungarian border.

In Western Europe Spain now has the highest stork population, with about 5,770 pairs. Yet this figure is 54.5 per cent down on 1957.

The main reason for the decline has been agricultural policies, including the destruction of wetlands and the use of pesticides.

The effect has been particularly devastating in western central Europe, excluding the GDR, which in 1984 had only 695 pairs, as against 5,720 in 1934.

Rejuvenation

Denmark, with 4,000 pairs in 1890, is down to 19, Holland to eight, Alsace-Lorraine to 30.

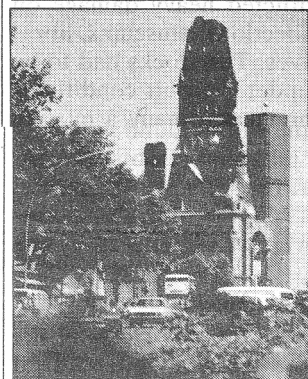
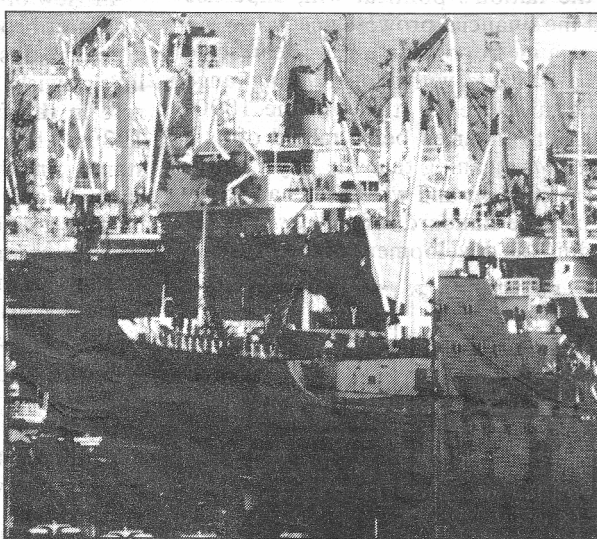
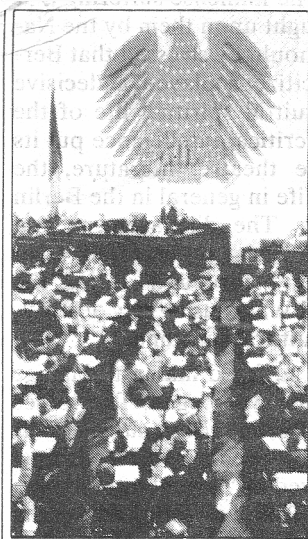
In Switzerland storks died out in 1950 but after lengthy experiments with captive birds 109 pairs are now breeding again.

Stork researchers are promoting specific programmes designed to help the species to survive.

Priority is being given in potential nesting areas to maintaining and extending wetlands and marshy meadows and large nature reserves with neither fences nor high-voltage overhead power cables.

dpa

(Allgemeine Zeitung, Mainz, 30 December 1986)



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